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MEANINGFUL FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOLS:
KAREN FAMILY PERSPECTIVES

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in English as a Second Language

Hamline University
Saint Paul, Minnesota
Fall 2019

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Dedication

To my Father in Heaven, thank you for giving me the strength, wisdom, and perseverance to never give up, have hope, and be a voice for the voiceless. To my husband, this would not have been possible without your constant support, encouragement, and love. To my babies, thank you for sharing your mama for four and a half years with constant studying and homework. I hope you know that you can do anything you set your mind to. To my committee, I am so grateful for your guidance and advice. I count myself lucky to know such strong, female leaders in this field. Last of all, to the Karen families in my district: I am so thankful for your bravery and honesty. Because of you, the world is a better place.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Beginning

Introduction

It was the largest school event of the year, and the school was packed with hundreds of students and their families ready to enjoy Bingo night at the elementary school I teach at. For the purpose of maintaining anonymity within this thesis, this elementary school will be referred to as Carsten Elementary. I scanned the gym for the English Learners I work with, and I noticed there was a large representation of Hmong and Latino families, but only a few of the Karen (pronounced k'REN) families that make up the second largest majority of the English Learners at Carsten. I sat down across one

Karen woman, who was alone, and began a conversation with her. Her daughter stopped by the table and mentioned that her mom doesn't usually like to come to these events because she feels uncomfortable and doesn't know enough English.

The thought occurred to me that even though the Karen families have been a part of our district for more than 10 years now, the staff are still struggling to find successful ways of building meaningful relationships and connections with them. Knowing how valuable family engagement is to student achievement, I began to wonder what we as educators are missing, and what our Karen families' perspectives were on meaningful family engagement.

I have yet to meet an educator who does not desire success for every one of their students they teach. As previously mentioned, one large contributing factor to student achievement is that of family involvement or engagement within the school community (Jensen & Minke, 2017). As I have been working with English Learners (EL - the term used in my district) families since 2008, it has become clear to me that the ideas and perspectives of what meaningful family engagement is to those who work in the school community however, may differ from that of the families' perspectives. My perception about the difference in what is meaningful family engagement between different stakeholders is supported by many researchers (McBrien, 2010; Chavez-Reyes, 2010; Rah, Choi, & Nguyen, 2009; Niehaus & Adelson, 2014; Naqvi, Carey, Cummins, & Altidor-Brooks, 2015). In my experience these differences can lead to miscommunication which could in turn have negative effects on the students and their education. In my work as a licensed ESL teacher (EL, the term used in my district), I have also observed that

family engagement might look different between different cultural groups. My experiences lead me to the following question for my thesis: *What does meaningful engagement with schools look like to Karen families?*

In this chapter I will cover the history and background of the Karen people, explaining what drove them to flee their home country and settle in the United States. I will also describe some of my experiences with the Karen families in my district and what led to the research and writing of this thesis. Next, I will define family engagement and reciprocal relationships, what I mean by meaningful engagement, and why these terms are important to this thesis. Lastly, I will give an overview of the following chapters of the thesis.

Background of Karen History and Culture

According to the Karen Organization of Minnesota (KOM, History of KOM, 2017) the Karen people have resided in Burma for the last several thousands of years. KOM remarks that due to oppression and conflict from the Burmese, the Karen people sided with the British Allies during WWII, hoping to obtain freedom from their oppressors, while the Burmese sided with the Japanese. The Burmese managed to attain freedom from the British in 1948, but did not give the Karen people the land that was rightfully theirs. Since then, the Karen have been targeted by the Burmese military, forcing them to relocate, burning their villages, and killing and torturing their people.

KOM goes on to describe how this persecution caused the Karen people to flee to refugee camps in Thailand, and that circumstances did not improve a great deal for the

families in the camps. The organization writes how life was unpredictable, and the camps were sometimes shut down at a moments notice due to funding being cut. Oh and Van der Stouwe (2008) report that many restrictions were placed on the families in the camps. The authors go on to describe how the refugees were kept from leaving the camps and arrested if they did, which forced them to try to find ways to support their families while confined to the camp, waiting sometimes for years to be resettled in another country.

Quadros and Sarroub (2016) report that the Karen people are some of the most recent refugees to arrive in the Midwest. The metropolitan area where I am located has become one of the largest Karen communities in the United States with an estimate of 17,000 Karen people that have relocated here since the early 2000s (KOM, mnkaren.org, 2017). This large influx of Karen refugees made a significant impact in my early years of teaching and led me to the topic of this thesis.

Professional Background and the Intersection with the Research Question

I began teaching 5th grade in my current district, a suburb of a large metropolitan area, in 2008. This was the second year the district had received a large influx of Karen refugees from Thailand. Even though I have lived in this geographic area my entire life, I had never heard of the Karen and knew nothing about them. I immediately began to attempt to connect to these students and their families, but found it difficult. At family/teacher conferences, the families were incredibly quiet, asking no questions, hardly making eye contact.

The staff at my elementary school made a special effort to try to get Karen

families involved in the school community, offering transportation to and from events, and providing food and translators. The idea was that if we could get the families to attend the events and make them feel welcome and comfortable, this would encourage further engagement and develop stronger relationships between staff and families. The families consistently came to the family/teacher conferences, but did not participate in most of the other annual events like our Celebrate Learning nights, Winter Carnivals, School Concerts, etc. Since 2008, my last ten years in this district, I have noticed that this is a pattern that continues.

In 2017 I started working at Carsten Elementary School in the same district teaching elementary EL and reading intervention, and though the Karen families have been a part of our school communities for a while now, school staff are still struggling to meaningfully engage with them. For example, at one of our biggest turnouts for our school Bingo night I have noticed that our Hmong, Latino, and Nepali students attend this event, but there are a lack of Karen families.

During a professional development for the EL teachers this year, we were asked to list and share ways that we engage our EL families in our district. I noticed that the things the staff are doing, such as using popular apps like Seesaw, or hosting fun events like Bingo night, are not creatively reaching all of the cultures and families in our district. This discussion led me to wonder how the staff in my district are connecting with the Karen families in meaningful ways, or if there was something that would motivate the families to build relationships with the teachers and staff in our schools. I also began to contemplate what the Karen families' ideas of meaningful family engagement within the

school community might be. Do they desire more than what is offered? These considerations are what's leading my research, and have been on my mind for years.

My hope is to come to a conclusion that will change the way the school system and EL families interact in the future. I plan to share my findings with colleagues in my current district and work collaboratively with administration and leadership to provide meaningful opportunities for family engagement of ELs, and specifically the Karen families going forward. There are several key terms that will be used to discuss this topic, and will be defined in the following sections.

Operational Definitions

Naqvi et al. (2015) reports that the phrase 'family engagement' can be an ambiguous term that has many assumptions and ideas attached to it. In order to avoid ambiguity and confusion of this term, I will define how this term will be used in this thesis. Alameda-Lawson (2014) describes traditional family involvement to include conventional ideas such as family participation in schools including attendance of conferences, Parent/Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, concerts, and homework help at home. An outcome of this view point is described by Ferlazzo (2009).

Ferlazzo (2009) argues that with this traditional family involvement, the energy and ideas come from the school. He goes on to state that moving to a viewpoint of family engagement changes the dynamic. The family engagement perspective results in the ideas and energy being family driven through the development of reciprocal and trusting relationships between families and school staff. Naqvi et al. (2015) notes how

family engagement then becomes a tool to tap into families' funds of knowledge, the resources and ideas they bring, and it a two-way collaboration between families and school, including the families as decision makers of the school and is empowering and identity affirming to the families. Both phrases of family involvement and family engagement will be used interchangeably in this thesis, but the meaning implied for both terms will be the latter definition. Another term important to this topic is that of deficit thinking.

According to Garcia and Guerra, (2004) deficit thinking is when leadership and educators in schools districts place the blame of a lack of academic success on the student and family, rather than examining the institutions, practices, or assumptions that might contribute to the academic struggles. Specifically, when it comes to family engagement and involvement, Rah et al., (2009) link deficit thinking to families being perceived to be uncaring and their participation in their child's education goes unrecognized. The authors go on to say that this type of thinking leads to severed trust and negatively affects relationships with the families. Reciprocal relationships cannot be established if teachers and staff have a deficit mindset.

Additionally, He, Bettez and Levin (2017) describe how deficit thinking by teachers causes low expectations, specifically when it comes to students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The authors go on to explain how this type of thinking causes immigrant and refugee families to be excluded from school activities because of the language and cultural differences, which results in their voices not being heard. The research of these authors (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Rah et al., 2009; He et al.;

2017) state that deficit thinking can be a significant barrier to reciprocal, meaningful relationships of staff and families within school communities.

In her article *The Leader's Role in Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement*, Edds (2016) writes about the research on student performance, and how it asserts the importance of meaningful family engagement to positively impact students' academic achievement. She goes on to describe meaningful relationships between families (stakeholders), schools, and districts as "two-way dialogue and high levels of trust and interdependence (p.37)." In this thesis, 'meaningful relationships' will be defined as purposeful, two-way relationships built on trust.

Lastly, it is important to clarify that in this thesis the term EL is frequently used, however the needs of the bilingual/bicultural families that do not have children in the program are still a part of the consideration in this research. While many students may exit the EL program and appear to be "Americanized", their parents may potentially be excluded or overlooked. This research will address the perceptions of all Karen families at the school, not just the ones with children in the EL program.

Outline of Thesis

In chapter one I provided background, context, guiding questions, and definitions for this study. Chapter two presents a literature review on the research existing around family engagement, EL family engagement, and the educational experiences of refugees in refugee camps. The third chapter describes the qualitative study that was conducted, while the fourth chapter offers an analysis of the qualitative data obtained from the study.

This thesis concludes with chapter five, which is a discussion of suggestions for use of the results of this study, as well as recommendations for further study.

Conclusion

Keeping the students' success as the focal point for teaching, teachers and administrators cannot deny the need for family engagement that is meaningful and of value to all parties involved. To avoid deficit thinking from the perspective of school staff who are not familiar with Karen culture, it is vital to educate ourselves on how our EL families would define reciprocal and meaningful engagement, especially the Karen families, seeing as there is not much literature or research on this topic. The next chapter will summarize the literature on the topics on the importance of family engagement in general, EL family engagement specifically and the educational experiences of refugees in refugee camps, and then goes on to examine the education system in Karen refugee camps in Thailand.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Chapter Overview

This research investigates the question: *What does meaningful engagement with schools look like to Karen families?* The following sections will summarize and review literature relating to this topic. The first section explores the significance of family engagement in education and how it supports academic success. The barriers and supports to family engagement will be covered, along with frameworks and strategies that have been successful in promoting the engagement of families and reciprocal relationships.

The second section narrows the topic of family engagement down to family engagement of English learner (EL) families and examines the studies that relates specifically to EL students. First, the unique circumstances EL families face that affect family engagement will be discussed, along with the barriers that stand in the way. Following that, supports and strategies that have been successful in engaging and building reciprocal relationships with families of EL students will be examined.

The final section delves into the educational experiences of refugees coming from refugee camps. Specifically, the organizations that provide education in these camps are discussed, along with the state of these education systems within the camps. I begin by reviewing recent studies of education in refugee camps in general, then go on to specifically look at the systems of education within the nine Karen refugee camps in Thailand. Considering the past educational experiences of the Karen families will help to inform the development of the interview questions, as well as provide background knowledge to support the development of reciprocal relationships with the families of the Karen students at Carsten.

Significance of Family Engagement in Education

In her dissertation and qualitative study on family involvement and student achievement in K-5 schools, McClain (2015) emphasizes the importance of family engagement in their child's education to increase academic success and reduce troubling behaviors. The importance of family engagement is highlighted in the research of Ma, Shen, Krenn, Hu, & Yuan (2016). These authors report that family engagement is the

strongest predictor of student achievement and not socioeconomic status, family's education, or racial background. Instead it is the involvement of families in their child's education and in the community.

This involvement can lead to the improvement of academic success. Jeynes (2011) specifically states that students' grades, homework, test scores, and attitudes all improve when families participate and are engaged in their learning. In agreement with Jeynes research, McNeal (2015) posits certain types of family engagement considerably raise math, science, and reading achievement, along with expectations for education. Family engagement has also been found to reduce dropout rates, and can increase students' motivation for participation within school (R. Wong, Ho, W. Wong, Tung, Chow, Rao, Chan, & Ip, 2018). There is also evidence that parent engagement programs can have a positive impact.

Certain family engagement programs like Collective Parent Engagement (CPE) have reported an increase in test scores by 250 percent (Alameda-Lawson, 2014). Research on the use of identity texts to engage families done by Naqvi, Carey, Cummins, and Altidor-Brooks, (2015), suggests that when families are empowered in meaningful ways, this empowerment is passed on to their children. Both CPE and identity texts are just a few strategies to successfully engage families, and will be described in detail later in this chapter. All of these findings discussed in this section reinforces the potential positive outcomes of developing reciprocal relationships with the Karen community to engage families in ways that support student achievement.

Theories and Frameworks of Family Engagement

There are many theories and frameworks to support family engagement and involvement in schools in the United States such as Epstein's six types of family involvement, Ho and Willms four general dimensions of engagement, or Grolnick and Slowiaczek's 3 types of family involvement (Mah et. al, 2015). Epstein's framework specifically focuses on the obligation of the school and community in regards to family engagement (Epstein, Sanders, Sheldon, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, Van Voorhis, Martin, Thomas, Greenfield, Hutchins, & Williams, 2009).

Her first type of involvement is parenting, and discusses the importance of the school and community supporting and educating families to ensure a positive home environment. Type two involvement is centered on communication that is effective between school and home. The third type is volunteering, and how schools and communities recruit families to participate and organize school functions. Giving guidance and reinforcement to families for involvement at home is the fourth type of Epstein's framework. Decision making within schools and communities is the fifth type, where families are trained to become leaders and participate in the decisions being made in the schools. The last type, collaborating with the community, is where resources and services for strengthening families are identified and integrated within the school and community. These six types of involvement could inform educators on how to create reciprocal relationships with all families, including English learners. Figure A shows a visual description of Epstein's levels of involvement.

Figure A: Visual Description Of Epstein's Six Levels of Involvement

**Keys to Successful Partnerships:
Six Types of Involvement**



Epstein, et al. 2009. *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action, Third Edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Ma et al., (2015) mentions several prominent organizations that have been established based on Epstein's framework, such as the Kellogg Foundation, the Aspen Institute, Family Leadership Development Institute, And Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group. All of these organizations focus on educating and empowering families, making sure they play key roles in leadership within schools, and supporting strong family networks in the community.

Grolnick and Slowiaczek's theory has an emphasis on resources (Grolnick & Słowiacek, 1994). Their three types of family engagement are behavioral involvement, personal involvement, and intellectual involvement. Behavioral involvement consists of visiting and participating in school activities. The personal involvement of families is the way they show their cares and concerns for their children in and out of school. Families who participate in academic activities outside of school, such as reading with their

children and helping them with homework, would be considered a type of intellectual involvement. Figure B interprets Grolnick and Slowiaczek's types of engagement.

Figure B: Grolnick and Slowiaczek's Three Types of Family Engagement		
<u>Behavioral Involvement</u>	<u>Personal Involvement</u>	<u>Intellectual Involvement</u>
Example: visiting and participation in school activities	Example: helping with homework, asking about school	Example: going to the library and talking about current events

Ho and Willms (1996) suggest four dimensions of family engagement that support academic development. Families are encouraged to incorporate discussions at home surrounding classes, events, and activities at school. Another dimension is that of home supervision, where families monitor homework, screen time, and socializing with friends on school nights. Like the other frameworks, home-school connection, where communication between staff and families is strong, is another dimension. Lastly, volunteer work, such as the Parent Teacher Organization, is said to give children an understanding of the value of education. Ho and Willms (1996) state the involvement of home discussion has the greatest connection to academic achievement for students. See Figure C, which depicts the four dimensions of engagement.

Figure C: Ho & Willms Four Dimensions of Family Engagement			
<u>Home Discussion</u>	<u>Home Supervision</u>	<u>Home-School Connection</u>	<u>Volunteering Work for School</u>
Example: discuss courses, school events and activities with child	Example: monitoring homework and screen time	Example: communication between school and families regarding child's academics,	Example: volunteering for school events or participating in PTO

		behaviors, events, etc.	
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Collective Parent Engagement is one new type of family involvement model that incorporates many of these four dimensions discussed by Ho and Willms.

Almeda-Lawson (2014) describes an approach to family involvement called Collective Parent Engagement (CPE), which contrasts traditional family engagement strategies like support with homework and communication with families. The purpose of this approach is to focus on the families' social network for low-income families. The goal of CPE is to empower families to work together to dismantle the barriers that affect them. Three dimensions of empowerment were developed: intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral.

For the intrapersonal phase, social workers endeavored to develop the confidence of families, which led up to the interactional phase. In the interactional phase families would participate in activities that cultivated interactional empowerment by determining the demands and challenges unique to their community. Once the needs were identified, families would receive 40 hours of paid training, and implementation of intervention programs would follow the completion of training. Training and implementation would be considered the behavioral phase.

The CPE approach to family engagement not only improved the lives of the families and their children, but also the community. It also led to reciprocal relationships between the school community and the families. The next section of this chapter will go on to describe family engagement, specifically in relation to EL families, and why

engaging and developing reciprocal relationships with families of English learners is vital to these students' success.

Barriers and Supports for Family Engagement

Given the research that supports family engagement, only about 20 percent of families are thoroughly engaged in their child's education (Hodges, 2018). Offering several suggestions to increase this percentage, Jeynes (2011) mentions a few factors that can support family engagement. These factors included having teachers and staff who reach out with respect and appreciation for families, such as home visits, reinforce involvement. Additionally, Jeynes (2011) suggests that high expectations for students and strong communication with families will strengthen families' efforts in engagement because, according to the author, families who feel valued and welcomed are more willing to participate and be involved. The conclusions of Jeynes (2011) are echoed in a meta-analysis completed by Ma et al., (2016).

Ma et al., (2016) completed a meta-analysis of the relationship between learning outcomes and family involvement, revealing multiple components for a strong foundation in family engagement. The authors report that fostering relationships that are healthy, providing clear communication, demonstrating that respect and trust is reciprocal, and exhibiting "a genuine willingness to share power between families and school" (p. 775) encourages engagement of families. All of these suggestions can develop partnerships between families, schools, and communities that support family and children at school and at home.

Hodges (2018) shares five suggestions on how schools can support families in higher levels of engagement. First, he proposes that the school's leaders should be active in their responses to concerns of family and encourage the community and families to believe in the school's future. Secondly, Hodges also suggests that families desire quality academic support whether or not their child is excelling or struggling in their classes. He states that families are looking for commitment and support from teachers in all circumstances.

His third suggestion affirms the belief that families aim to find an environment that is inviting and enjoyable for their child, yet disciplines appropriately and respectfully. Learning that is aligned to students' strengths, and exceptional communication are two final ways Hodges proposes to create a culture that supports and engages families. He acknowledges the effort these five suggestions take, but argues they are attainable with consistent and intentional effort.

Naqvi et al., (2015) presents how affirming families' identities is another way to support their engagement. According to the authors, families who feel inferior to staff and administrators will refuse to participate in collaboration towards their child's success. Therefore, family-educator communications should be reinforcing and affirming in order to create reciprocal relationships. The framework used to affirm identities of families will be covered later in this chapter.

Schools that do not affirm families' identities often have a deficit mindset (Naqvi et al., 2015). Garcia and Guerra (2004) describe a deficit mindset as educators believe that students come to school without the necessary skills and knowledge needed to

succeed, and this is the fault of the families who do not care about or support their child's education. This mindset becomes a barrier and can lead to long-term underachievement and an increase in the achievement gap. This deficit thinking is further explained by Berman, Chambliss, and Geiser (1999) who argues that teaching staff can place blame on families for low-achieving students. This results in families feeling inferior and damages school-family relationships, supporting the idea that affirming families' identities is essential.

In the process of interviewing families for their perspective on barriers to engagement, Naqvi et al., (2015) found finances, time, lack of transportation, decreased confidence in reading and math, insufficient knowledge of the school system, and language to be the main obstacles in their involvement. Eisner and Meidert (2011) also present aspects of family engagement to be reliant on obligations relating to family matters, management of their time, personal obligations, and support from local community resources.

Specific barriers related to socioeconomic status and low-income families are mentioned by Alameda-Lawson (2014) and her study on Collective Parent Engagement and Children's Academic Achievement. According to Alameda-Lawson (2014) this is due to families being consumed by certain dynamics of their socioeconomic status, such as challenges with employment, housing restraints, and social exclusion, it can be a struggle to be engaged in school-directed ways. These families are likely doing as much as they can, focusing on aspects of alternative needs for their children, such as social and

developmental needs. Socioeconomic barriers can be one challenge for developing reciprocal relationships with families and encouraging engagement.

Jeynes' (2011) meta-analysis of family involvement argues family structure can also be a barrier. For example, homes with two parents tend to have higher levels of engagement than homes with single parents. He stresses the fact that he is not proposing single parents are not engaged as best as they can be, but that the more adults involved, the stronger the sense of family engagement the student will have. It is easier for families to have a higher level of engagement in a two parent home, making a single parent home as one barrier to family engagement.

Family Engagement and the Importance for English Learners

As of the fall of 2015, English Learners make up 14% of total public school enrollment in cities, and is one of the fastest growing segments within the school-aged population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Niehaus and Adelson (2014) report that though this population grows, teachers struggle to engage their EL families or create partnerships that are effective. The authors go on to state this may be due to differences in family outreach and support, yet these partnerships are essential due to the fact that EL students are at higher risk for academic struggles because of the unique challenges that they face (Niehaus & Adelson, 2014; Rah, Choi, & Nguyen, 2009).

The academic performance of ELs continues to trail the achievement of their English proficient peers (Niehaus & Adelson, 2014). Much of this struggle can be contributed to the challenging circumstances that they face daily. Stressful

environmental conditions such as being separated from families still in their home country, poverty, conflict of cultures between home and school, or trauma experienced in home country, can lead to negative student outcomes. These concerns, however, can be reduced with increased family engagement.

Barriers to English Learner Family Engagement

Neihaus and Adelson (2014) purport there are many barriers that stand in the way of EL's family engagement. For example, families may face language barriers, lack of resources, education, trust and discipline. Additionally, the traditional view that a school staff holds as to what family engagement looks like can be a barrier in itself. The language barrier is often the first and one of the most complex challenges that families encounter in a school setting. This barrier can cause a lack of communication between home and school, and can lead families to frustration and participate less. Much of the information that comes easily and naturally for proficient English speakers is often not made accessible for speakers of other languages. Basic school practices such as teacher workshop days, for example, can be difficult to understand.

For example, one documented instance of this lack of understanding describes a Somali mother's experience, in which her daughter arrived home early from school and she could not understand why. The mother felt displeased at the lack of notice or clarity on the reason for the early dismissal (McBrien, 2011). This is just one example of how one family's lack of information related to school led to frustration. Another barrier can

be who is responsible for the translation of school related information into the home language.

As schools have more information they wish to share with families, the role of translating this information is often placed on the child if the family speaks another language and is not proficient in English. Panferov (2010) and Rah et al. (2009) point out that having the child act as the translator often leads to role reversals within the home, which unfortunately can lead to additional challenges, such as family authority being challenged which can blur the roles between family and child. This can have a negative impact on families, as families may feel a sense of disempowerment, or as though they have lost their authority as head of the family. This, in turn, can create tension and lead to inter-generational conflict (Rah et al., 2009; Tran & Hodgson, 2015).

Language is just one of the challenges EL families may face. Naqvi et al. (2015) presents other barriers, such as inadequate transportation or families working multiple jobs to support their families, make attending school functions challenging. Working more than one job does not leave substantial free time to participate in school activities, nor does it leave much physical or mental energy for families to engage. McBrien (2011) writes that a combination of economic and cultural burdens, not to mention potential trauma from their past experiences, dominate a considerable amount of the families' thoughts and time. The author also notes how this preoccupation with survival necessities can be perceived as indifference from the school's perspective, which leads to damaged relationships between families and staff and does not encourage reciprocal

relationships between the two. Another barrier identified by Naqvi et al. (2015) is related to the deficit mindset toward EL families.

Naqvi et al. (2015) states that school staff often have negative perceptions of EL families. These negative perceptions contribute to what is commonly referred to as a deficit mindset. McBrien (2011) suggests that the effect of this deficit mindset can cause schools to appear unwelcoming. Additionally, families can feel a lack of trust due to these prejudices and biases. Families assert that these biases often lead teachers to have lower expectations for the EL students. McBrien (2011) also suggests that teachers should not judge the families' lack of traditional engagement as indifference, but instead be aware of cultural differences and respect the strengths that families bring to their child's education, such as an entirely different fund of knowledge in another language.

Another barrier noted by Rah et al. (2009) is the lack of educational experience of the families, and understanding of the school system in the United States. EL families are often illiterate in English. Further, many families who have not had formal education in their home countries are also unable to read and write in their home language. This can lead to multiple challenges, such as interacting with school staff or helping with homework. This can lead to a lack of confidence and lead to feelings of inferiority. Naqvi et al. (2015) writes that if families feel inferior, they will not participate.

In addition to oftentimes feeling inferior and unwelcome, Panferov (2010) remarks on how the varying experiences with education in an EL family's home country can affect their views and expectations of education in the United States. This can create dissonance between school staff and EL families, as school staff are often unaware of EL

families educational backgrounds and expectations, and therefore find it challenging to encourage families to be involved and engaged in their child's education.

For example, many traditional family engagement opportunities involve the family coming into the school and leading a small group of students in some type of academic activity. This type of engagement requires that the family be literate, and also competent and comfortable in an academic setting, which is not always the case.

Chavez-Reyes (2010) points out that most EL families from refugee backgrounds have had no formal educational experience, and are not familiar with the U.S. school system. However, families are often considered an expert in their child's schooling. This assumption can lead to feelings of inadequacy on the families part, and damages relationships with the families. Panferov (2010) suggests getting to know the EL families and their educational experiences to help tackle this challenge.

McBrien (2011) asserts that once teachers take into consideration the families' experiences with education, they will learn that many EL families struggle to trust authority, even those within the school. One of the main reasons this is so is because of the contrasting ways discipline is handled here in the United States compared to in the home countries of the families.

McBrien (2011) reports that corporal punishment in education and families is common for many countries around the world, and families frequently feel as though they are unable to punish their children in ways they are familiar with. Because of this, some families feel their children are learning to be disrespectful while in school, and if they discipline using corporal punishment, the schools may retaliate (Helo-Trevino, 2016).

McBrien (2011) reports that some families even feel like schools are encouraging children to question their family's authority, causing trust to be severed and reciprocal relationships impossible.

The last barrier to reciprocal relationships with EL families that will be covered is the traditional view of family engagement that many staff and administrators hold. Chavez-Reyes (2010) defines this traditional type of engagement as classroom volunteering, homework help, and participating in the Parent Teacher Organization. As mentioned in her article, *Inclusive Approaches to Parent Engagement for Young English Language Learners and Their Families*, Chavez-Reyes (2010) presents the idea that this model of traditional involvement only creates conflict between school staff and EL families and suppresses families from non-traditional backgrounds. Chavez-Reyes (2010) mentions that the traditional involvement at times supports acculturation and assimilation, not ethnic heritage maintenance, which adds to the conflict.

Traditional views of engagement create dominance-submission interaction patterns where schools tend to insist or demand specific actions or behaviors from families instead of collaborating and listening to their suggestions and opinions. Rah et al. (2009) acknowledge that traditional views can be disempowering instead of inclusive and empowering, and non-traditional types of family engagement go unrecognized, damaging relationships with EL families.

Supports and Strategies for English Learner Family Engagement

EL families are more likely to be involved and engaged in their child's education if support services are provided (Niehaus & Adelson, 2014). Rah et al. (2009) points out the fact that schools are the main point of contact for families and their host country, and are also where they can be connected to their needed resources. Chavez- Reyes (2010) reports that when schools help to provide information to these needed resources and services, they feel more accepted and more inclined to be involved. One way schools can do this is through the work of cultural liaisons.

Cultural liaisons are known as the mediators between schools and EL families (McBrien, 2011; Rah et al., 2009). Chavez-Reyes (2010) notes their job is more than acting as a translator between families and staff, they act as a bridge between schools and families, and are a role model that works towards inclusion and integration of EL families. Rah et al. (2009) proposes one duty of liaisons might be to design family education programs on how to navigate the U.S. school system. Typical information included in family education programs would be school norms and traditions, formal versus informal complaints, the value of participating in the school system, who to discuss grades with, volunteering, internet safety, and how to discipline children (Helo-Travino, 2016; Rah et al., 2009). Not only are these critical for families to support school efforts, families are empowered to advocate for their children. Liaisons not only implement education programs, but they can also connect families to community resources outside of school (Rah et al., 2009).

Having a foundation of community/school/family partnerships helps to ensure the success of EL students and encourages the engagement of families in their child's

education (Rah et al., 2009). In the article, *Building Bridges Between Refugee Parents and Schools*, Rah et al. (2009) notes two successful examples of this are the organizations Adam Area Hmong Mutual Association, Inc. (AAHMA) and Family and School Together (FAST). AAHMA's goal is to not only promote cultural appreciation and awareness within schools, but to also support families in English communication skills and coordinate family engagement in the school community.

The FAST program, also geared towards supporting Hmong families, works on improving relationships between families and their children, and families and teachers. Families who participated in this program reported feeling more comfortable in schools, and that their children listened more at home (Rah et al., 2009). These community, family, and school partnerships were essential to reducing barriers in family engagement and creating reciprocal relationships with EL families.

Another potential support for EL family engagement is the administration leadership style within the school community. Chavez-Reyes (2010) reports servant leadership strategies are necessary to target the needs of the families and community and integrates culturally responsive procedures and programs. Instead of being the only expert on school practices, the principal instead depends on collaboration and shares power of decision making with all families. Including families in decision making within the school system reinforces trust between families and the school (Rah et al., 2009).

To do this, administrators should use inclusive strategies to target EL families to join committees, invite them into classrooms to observe, and engage in home visits. Helo-Trevino's (2016) study on family involvement and the impact on hispanic English

language learners showed that the children of families who were targeted for recruitment in committees and classroom involvement significantly accelerated academically.

Administrators should not only deliberately recruit families, but they also need to be intentional in the training of their staff member so that they respect and value the cultures and strengths of their EL families. One way to do this is to encourage teachers to do home visits for their students.

Home visits build relationships and trust between schools and families, and help the staff to learn the culture and background of their students and families (Chen, Kyle, & McIntyre, 2008; Panferov 2010; Naqvi et al., 2015). Chen et al. (2008) report that home visits not only reduce the deficit views many teachers hold, teachers are also able to use what they learned to make connections to the students' lives and incorporate that into their lessons. When teachers reach out to families to learn from them, families then know that they are integral and not peripheral. Naqvi et al. (2015) mentions another benefit from reaching out to families is that teachers are then tapping in to the families' funds of knowledge.

Funds of knowledge is an inclusive engagement strategy where schools encourage EL families and provide opportunities to share their home culture and experiences (Panferov, 2010; Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992). Not only does this demonstrate a positive attitude to EL students about their home language and culture, it reinforces the fact that EL families have strengths and resources and can be noteworthy collaborators (Chen et al., 2008; Niehaus et al., 2014). Chavez-Reyes (2010) adds that using families' funds of knowledge empowers them and encourages engagement in their children's

education. One inclusive approach that has been successful in overcoming barriers to family engagement with EL families is the use of identity texts (Naqvi et al., 2015).

Naqvi et al. (2015) describes the identity text strategy that was developed by Naqvi, Cummins, and Altidor-Brooks in 2012-2013. This program involved eleven EL families who spoke a variety of languages, a librarian, liaison, and researcher, who all shared their stories of language learning, experiences of coming to their host country and also with the children's school. Families wrote and shared these stories (identity texts) that included meaning of their names, and memories of their arrival and new culture.

The researchers found that the storytelling helped the families to relate to each other and shift viewpoints. Sharing these stories built trust and confidence in speaking English with others. Empowerment was gained, as well as meaningful engagement as families were more willing to participate in school activities the following year. Identity texts support and acknowledge families' experiences and cultural talents to support reciprocal relationship with staff in the school community (Naqvi et al., 2015). Identity texts can also give insight into pre-settlement experiences, specifically in regards to education, which is valuable for schools and teachers to be aware of due to the fact that these experiences can cause distrust and suspicion from the perspective of the EL families.

Education Experiences of Refugee Families to Inform on Engagement Perceptions

Panferov (2010) reports the difficulty of encouraging family engagement due to families' varying experiences with education, specifically with the pre-settlement experiences of refugee families. Dryden-Peterson (2016) explains that some of these

pre-settlement experiences consist of many barriers, a variety of exposures to content and language, and discrimination. Having knowledge of these pre-settlement experiences can help teachers and administrators better support their ELs. It can also build stronger reciprocal relationships with their families by building their background knowledge of their history before coming to their countries of resettlement. Though research is limited in this area, the following sections will cover education in settlement camps in general, and then more specifically in Karen Refugee camps in Thailand.

Education for refugees.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the international organization charged with the protection of refugees (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). This not only includes physical, political, and social protection, but the UNHCR also provides basic needs such as food, shelter, water, and education. Education for refugees is coordinated between UNHCR and the government of pre-settlement, and is dependent on the laws and policies of that country. In most cases, the education systems of these countries are already fragile and stretched-thin. Dryden-Peterson (2016) points out that families are exposed to these weak educational systems for extended lengths of time due to the fact that conflicts in the countries refugees have fled from are becoming more protracted. These protracted situations have led to the average length of exile in refugee camps to be 17 years.

Refugees face many barriers to education while residing in camps. The main barrier is reported by UNHCR (2012) that only 50% of refugees had access to primary school, which is a drastic difference to the 93% of children globally that have access.

This percentage goes down even more for the secondary level, where only 25% of refugees had access compared to 62% internationally. Those who do have access to education are at times hesitant to go to school because of the dangers they might face.

Some of these dangers are being exposed to authorities if there is a lack of legal status, or tensions between the refugees and authorities that may lead to abuse. Kirk and Winthrop (2007) assert that girls face an even higher sense of danger attending school in refugee camps. This potentially explains the fact that when refugees arrive to the United States, twenty-seven percent of refugee women over the age of twenty-five have not finished high school (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Having access to education is just one barrier refugees have to overcome. They also need to understand the language of instruction, which is not always the case.

Dryden-Peterson (2017) points out that language barriers are an added challenge for those receiving education in refugee camps. Typically, the language of the country of first asylum is the language of instruction. Some examples of this are refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo must transition from French to English in Uganda and Rwanda, and refugees from Sudan must shift to the use of Arabic to French in Chad. One concern for these language shifts is that educators place the refugees in classes with younger students, causing the students to fall behind in the content due to lack of exposure. This can be particularly challenging if families are relocated multiple times between camps where the language of instruction differs.

Waters and LeBlanc (2005) mention the formation of schooling in camps is often done on an ad hoc basis, meaning the focus is on basic needs rather than content

standards. For example, students might receive lessons on topics that help guarantee their survival and well-being, like the resistance of fighting forces, HIV/AIDS, landmines, hygiene and health (Kirk & Winthrop, 2007). While relevant to their present circumstances, these topics cause students to fall behind in academic content and place them at a disadvantage when they come to their country of permanent settlement.

In their article on promoting quality education in refugee contexts, Kirk and Winthrop (2007) points out the demand for quality teachers in refugee camps is high, and there is a lack of teachers available who have had proper training or experience. Many of these teachers have themselves just arrived at the camp fleeing dangerous circumstances in their home country and are dependent on their personal experiences with education to instruct their classes within the camps. These teachers have been observed abusing and disempowering their students, or excluding and discriminating against groups or individuals due to language or religious differences (Oh & Stouwe, 2008). Kirk and Winthrop (2007) also remark on the fact that the teachers in these camps do not desire to be teachers. They lack the confidence to teach, and many had not even finished their own secondary education, but felt a responsibility to the children. Though their intentions are good, there is a negative impact on the learning of the students.

Discrimination is a common experience for refugee families within education in the pre-settlement countries (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). This discrimination not only happens from peers and teachers, students are also exposed to it with the curriculum used in lessons. In her article on refugee experiences in countries of first asylum, Dryden-Peterson (2016) gives an example of discrimination within the content being

taught in the classroom where Somali refugees attending Kenyan schools have been in lectures where they have been likened to terrorists, and the term 'refugee' was considered a curse word. Experiences of discrimination such as this cause families and students to be suspicious of teachers and administrators in the country of resettlement.

Education in refugee camps of Thailand.

In her study on psychosocial development of children in refugee camps in Thailand, Tanaka (2013) reports that the protracted refugee situation with the Karen have resulted in countless children being born in and growing up in refugee camps. The education system within seven of the nine camps along the Thai-Burmese borders are run by the Karen Education Department, the Karen National Union, and the ministry of education of the exiled government. The education system of the two remaining camps are run by the Karenni Education Department which is different in the instructional language and content (Oh & Stouwe, 2008). The education in these camps is described as basic due to the fact that the teachers do not have training and are also residents of the camps.

Oh and Stouwe (2008) write that the Karen refugees have a strong appreciation for education because of the increase in social status, a raise in wages, and more job opportunities. This is also mentioned in Quadros and Sarroub's (2016) study of three Karen refugee women's experiences of their pre-settlement education. These women explained their motivation in literacy practices in and out of school in Thailand was to raise their social status and also because they would be better prepared once in their country of resettlement.

Despite their appreciation for education, the Karen refugees struggle with significant barriers to education in their camps (Oh & Stouwe, 2008). The Karen are forbidden from leaving their refugee camps, and are excluded from the opportunities that the Thai children have. Tanaka (2013) reports that refugees who leave without permission risk deportation, arrest, or detention. They are completely reliant on the aid organizations for all of their needs, including their education. Oh and Stouwe (2008) write on how their education systems are not accredited, and because there is a lack of trained teachers who are not camp residents, the content being learned is at times irrelevant. Karen refugees are isolated, and the result of this is that both students and teachers have no exposure to varying opinions, people, or perspectives.

Oh and Stouwe (2008) reveal exclusion as another barrier Karen refugees experience in the camps. Many teenagers who become pregnant or get married at an early age are excluded from access to education because the pregnancy is often prohibited. Of the 28 women in their study of inclusion in refugee camps in Thailand, 26 of the women had dropped out of school because of pregnancy. Oh and Stouwe (2008) go on to point out the collective pressure to disparage married and pregnant teenagers, and once the young women are married, they are forced to stay home and have very few opportunities for education and learning. There are night classes offered, but again, there is a lack of teachers because many of the daytime teachers are also trying to finish their secondary education and use these night classes as an opportunity to do just that.

Another form of exclusion presented by Oh and Stouwe (2008) is the language of instruction. What is unique about the Karen refugees is that although they share an ethnic

identity, they speak several different languages such as Skaw Karen, Pwo Karen, and Burmese. The language choice of their education is used as a way to exercise control and is often motivated by political considerations. The majority of the residents in the Thai refugee camps speak Skaw Karen and is used as the language of instruction. This specifically marginalizes the Burmese speaking students. To combat this, several schools in the camps have been designated as Burmese speaking schools, however these schools do not offer secondary education, therefore excluding the Burmese speaking Karen students.

Being aware of these educational experiences for Karen refugees can potentially give educators the background knowledge needed to avoid deficit thinking and perhaps facilitate meaningful relationships with their Karen families in their schools. Trust can be built between staff and families and miscommunication avoided. This awareness can also support a smoother transition from pre-settlement countries of asylum to re-settlement countries.

Conclusion

This chapter contained a review of literature related to the topic of family engagement in education. The first section explored the significance of family engagement in relation to academic success along with the supports and barriers. The research on EL family engagement was addressed, as well as frameworks and strategies that have been successful in the past. The last section reviewed the educational history of Karen families in refugee camps. The content covered in these sections are beneficial for

the preparation of the next chapter of my thesis, where I will discuss the process I used to gather data on Karen families' perspectives, specifically as they relate to meaningful engagement and relationships with school staff.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Introduction

This study is intended to explore the positive reciprocal relationships between the Karen families in my school district and the teachers of their children in order to support the academic success of the students. Reciprocal relationships are those that are trusting, two-way relationships between families and school staff. This study aims to explore the question: *What does meaningful engagement with schools look like to Karen families?*

This chapter will outline the methodology used to collect and analyze data to answer my research question. I will begin by describing this study's research paradigm. I will then provide a description of the context for data collection, which includes information on the participants, location, and data collection techniques. The procedure of data collection is outlined next, including data analysis and an ethics review. This is followed by the conclusion.

Qualitative Research Paradigm and Method

This study uses a heavily qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. The three data collection tools for this approach are: one-on-one interviews, a focus group, and family attendance sign-in forms. The purpose of qualitative research is to interpret a specific social situation, and the data developed is descriptive rather than statistical (Creswell, 2018). Merriam (2009) goes on to state that qualitative research is done in order to understand situations in their uniqueness in their natural settings.

This paradigm was chosen for two reasons: in order to collect data that is not directly observable, such as families' perspectives or beliefs, I must conduct open-ended, one-on-one interviews - a type of qualitative research. Interviewing allows me to collect descriptive data that will be reported in a narrative rather than statistical manner. A second reason for approaching this research using a qualitative approach is connected to conducting the interviews in the participants unique and natural setting - their homes. This interactive method of interviewing allows me to gather rich descriptive data, helping me to understand the experiences of the Karen families in interacting with or thinking about how they should/could interact with the school. Given their unique cultural background their narratives could be very different from other immigrant populations.

Additionally, I conducted a small, focus group. Focus groups are different in that the respondents can listen to others' responses and make additional observations and remarks (Merriam, 2009). The sampling is purposeful and the participants have knowledge about the topic.

The part of my research that is not qualitative, and more quantitative is the data being collected through family participation in school events during the school year of 2018-2019. This data looks at the numeric trends of participation between specific populations within the school that I teach at. However, given the small sample size of the data, it does not necessarily classify this as a mixed methods study.

Setting

The setting of my study is an elementary school in a school district of a first ring suburb of a large metropolitan area in the upper midwest. The school has about 500 students with 29.2 percent of English Learners (ELs). There is a wide variety of languages spoken such as Hmong, Spanish, Nepali, Yoruba, Vietnamese, Karen, and Arabic. Karen is the second largest population of multilingual students in the school.

In the 2017/2018 academic year, the results from required yearly state assessments indicate that 46 % of all students who took the assessment met or exceeded proficiency standards in reading. In math, 33% met or exceeded proficiency standards. Of those students who met or exceeded standards, 3% of those were ELs for math (3 Spanish, 2 Karen, and 1 Hmong), and only 1% of EL students met or exceeded in reading (2 Spanish speakers). This data suggests that the Karen population in this school might need some additional academic support.

Participants

The participants of this study are the families of Karen students in the school district community. All of the family participants have students that currently attend the elementary school I work at. The sample size is small, seven families members, and is convenience sampling due to the fact that I interviewed participants I have access to. The four families I conducted the home interviews with have been involved with Carsten for a maximum of two years. For the focus group, I selected three families whose children have attended the school that I work at for more than two years and who have attended at least one school function other than conferences.

Procedures

Once the IRB process was completed, I first had to narrow down potential candidates. The criteria to participate in the interview was to have had a child/children who have attended the school for two years or less. I had to cross check dates and event sign-in in forms to narrow down the families qualified to participate in the study. I then used my contact and interpreter, who is a former Karen student currently studying to be an ESL teacher, to help me recruit family members to interview. All the families responded positively to participating and there were no refusals to participate.

The goal in conducting one-on-one interviews in the families' homes, was to be where they feel most comfortable and willing to share openly. Previous experience with the Karen families has led me to assume they are anxious and somewhat closed off in the school setting. In the past, it has been a struggle to get clear and in-depth answers from these families due to what appears to me as either a lack of confidence or power imbalance between school staff and families. In late September I met with and interviewed four separate families in their homes. All four interviews were conducted within a twenty-four hour time span.

The interviews consisted of a range of thirteen to nineteen questions. This range depended the necessity for a follow-up question to garner a deeper understanding, or the fact that the question was covered in a previous answer. The first few questions aimed to gather information on the number of children who attend the school and the length of connection. The following questions were open-ended and explored the families' experiences with the school, if they feel comfortable, how they have been welcomed, if

their experiences were positive or if there were any difficulties, how they support their children, feel supported by the staff, and if they feel involved. Additionally, the interview questions attempted to determine if the events organized by the school are meaningful by inquiring about which events the families attend, why they chose to attend those events, and what else they would like to see offered. The remaining questions related to the families' impressions of how the school promotes the Karen culture at events and in the classroom. The list of questions given can be found in Appendices A.

After completing the interviews, the hand-written notes were typed up on Google Docs and the recordings were listened to multiple times in order to add any missed details to the notes. Next, all questions were printed, cut, and sorted with all four answers to one question in one pile. The answers were then analyzed for repeated words or phrases in order to identify themes.

The second data collection source was a focus group of three parents. Criterion for participating in the focus group was having a child/children attending the school for more than two years, and attending an event other than conferences. The focus group met at the school's conference room the day after the interviews were completed. I anticipated less anxiety from these families due to the fact that they appear to be more willing to attend school functions, thus the decision to meet at the school building. It took place on a weekend morning when there were not any other staff in the building. The focus group lasted an hour and a half.

The focus group questions consisted of the same questions as the interviews, with a few additional questions added. The additional questions focused on perceptions of

parent/teacher conferences and if they felt there was an opportunity to share concerns with the teachers. Additionally, the participants were that when they look back if there was something they wished they were aware of before coming to our school. The hope for the focus group was that the families would feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts due to the fact that they had been connected to our school for a longer period of time, and that the group setting would provide for an opportunity to bounce ideas off of each other. The list of additional questions for the focus group can be found in Appendices B.

Lastly, I gathered all event sign-in forms collected for the 2018-2019 school years. These forms are collected as a part of our Title 1 action plan to document engagement of families in our school. We are required to have a Title 1 action plan due to the fact that we receive Title 1 federal funds to assist in meeting the educational needs of our large population of low-income students.

115 forms were collected for five separate events: fall and spring conferences, meet the teacher night, the academic expo, special friend's day, and writing celebrations. I then identified the number of Hmong, Spanish, and Karen speaking families that attended each event. I compared these numbers to the total number in attendance, along with comparing this data to the total percentage of Hmong, Spanish, and Karen families that attend our school. The purpose of this was to gather solid data for who attends the events offered by the school.

Interview Tool Development and Implementation

After having met with the interpreter, who is strongly connected with the Karen community and education, we compiled a list of interview and focus group questions appropriate to this study. These interviews and focus group were recorded with the use of my phone with my iPad as a back-up recording device. Additionally, I took notes while conducting the interviews and group. I did semi-structured interviews, utilizing the set list of questions, while at the same time having an open-ended, conversational tone that encouraged participants to share their insights. Once the interviews and focus group were complete, I reviewed my notes and listened to the interview multiple times in twenty-four hours in order to make sure nothing was missed. The length of the interview did not last longer than forty to forty-five minutes. All families were gifted with a gift card to thank them for their time and support.

Data Analysis

Once all the data was collected, I listened to the interviews and focus group recordings multiple times to take thorough notes which would allow for an opportunity to identify themes. I then arranged the participants' answers on to one document where all the answers were sorted under each question. I used color coding to analyze and identify the emerging themes.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include a small sample size. There was a limited number of families interviewed, which results in a limited amount of data gathered. Additionally,

interviews and focus groups provide indirect information that is filtered through the views of the interviewees and an interpreter communicating in another language. There is potential room for error since the information is being interpreted. An added limitation is that of the setting. For the focus group, the setting of the school could possibly be a source of anxiety for participants and affect responses, so I would need to be aware of this during the interview process. Furthermore, I need to keep in consideration the fact that not all people are equally articulate and perceptive. Lastly, and possibly the greatest limitation, is my positionality as a white woman reporting on a cultural community that I do not belong to, and also my positionality as a teacher in the school. Due to my positionality as a white woman, my presence may cause biased responses, but I may bring my own biases into the interviews. Moreover, being an employee of the school adds a power dynamic that may compel the families to only speak positively regarding their experiences with the school.

Conclusion

In closing, I conducted research using three tools: home interviews, a focus group, and school event sign-in forms. These tools were used to gain valuable insight into the perspectives of the Karen families and identify what meaningful family engagement is to them. Chapter 4 will present findings for this research.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to inform on the data collected from this study. My research question was: *What does meaningful engagement with schools look like to Karen families?* The following themes emerged in my endeavor to answer this question.

1. Karen families perceive meaningful engagement to be culturally relevant.
2. Karen families perceive meaningful engagement to be relational.
3. Karen families perceive meaningful engagement as being equipped with resources that empower them to support their children

Chapter four will present each of these themes independently, along with evidence that supports each finding.

Data Synthesis and Analysis

The three data collection tools used for this research were: interviews, focus group, and event sign-in forms. Once the data was collected from the interviews and focus group, all answers were organized with their correlating questions, and the collection of answers were analyzed for themes. The next step of the process was to examine the 115 event sign-in forms to determine numeric trends of participation for the

Hmong, Karen, and Spanish speaking families at the school. These were purposely selected due to the fact that they are the top three languages spoken, other than English. With these three collection tools, I was able to triangulate my data to identify themes for the purpose of answering the research question.

Karen Families Perceive Meaningful Engagement to be Culturally Relevant

The in-home interviews and focus group revealed a major theme to be the relevance of culture in regards to meaningful engagement for the Karen families at Carsten. When asked how they would like to be involved many parents shared experiences with previous schools where they were able to showcase their culture. One mother described how the Karen families would cook Karen meals for the school staff at the beginning of the year, and two additional times throughout the year for school events. The Karen cultural liaison would also dress in traditional Karen clothing for conferences and share information about their culture with other families in the school.

Being able to teach the other families about their cultural identity was important to the families in the interviews and focus group. One parent shared how she was talking with a non-Karen family at an event, and when she told them she was Karen, they had no idea what that was. "I felt not known," she stated. When one mom suggested their children could showcase their culture in the talent show, another mom mentioned, "Parents want to showcase too." She added that having some kind of culture fair would be a great way to do this.

Relating to culturally relevant engagement was the concern that the Karen children are losing their culture and language. Families shared that “the kids are really being taught the American culture” and “if the school could also promote the Karen culture, that would be great, it would teach them to value their own culture”. He continued on with simple suggestions such as the teachers in the school wearing traditional Karen clothing once a week to show support and validation of their culture.

Through the interpreter, the mom explained, “A problem I see is that English is becoming the dominant language. We want our kids to value their identity as Karen. If their teachers could tell them that English is important, but also, let’s learn about your culture as well, they will know that their culture is important and will be valued as a Karen person.” When asked if she would be interested in some kind of Karen language class offered by the school, she said she would love that and make her daughter go. These responses by this participant supports the research on the importance of affirming families’ identities in order to encourage engagement (Naqvi et al., 2015). These findings additionally support the research of Chavez-Reyes (2010), that states traditional involvement sometimes supports acculturation and assimilation, and not ethnic maintenance

One father explained his desire to have the Karen culture represented in his children’s learning as well, and not just promoted at events. He said it could be something as simple as providing books that are about their culture. He recalled an assignment his son had recently, where he presented about an item from his Karen culture to his class. This sent the message that their culture is valued.

As previously mentioned, one idea expressed was to have the school offer some type of Karen club after school. Being that there is already an after school program in place that is free to all students, the families agreed that this could be a great addition and would relieve some of their concerns. One mother shared, “My daughter really wants to learn more Karen, but in our culture, the kids don’t think it’s the mom’s job to teach, that is the teacher’s job. So she does not want to sit and learn from me.” Another mother explained that she never learned to read or write in Karen so she is not able to teach her children to do those things, but has a strong desire for them to learn them. Due to the fact that English is the dominant language, their children are losing interest and motivation to maintain their home language. “If they see their friends and teachers showing interest in learning the Karen language, maybe my child will want to maintain their language too,” one mom mentioned. Several families shared the increasing struggle to communicate with their children at home because of their diminishing Karen language. “I told him to grab the rice and he brings me the brown sugar!” one parent exclaimed. She added, “If there was a class for him to learn Karen, I would make him go!”

Offering and facilitating opportunities for cultural validation and representation was one of the strongest themes gathered from the data collected for this research. All families expressed an interest in this, and how the initiation and willingness of the school staff to do this would send the message that their culture and identity as Karen is valued. This evidence supports the idea that Karen families perceive meaningful engagement to be culturally relevant.

Karen Families Perceive Meaningful Engagement to be Relational

The second theme that stood out was the value placed on relationships within the Karen community, and how that is something they feel is lacking in our school community. One father explained, “The Karen culture is communal, and it is so important to build relationships and friendships with the teachers, but it can be hard for us to reach out and do that.” When asked what he would like to see offered more at the school, he mentioned the idea of teachers being available to do home visits or Karen church visits to build relationships and experience their culture in order to see how they build community. He shared about two classroom teachers visiting their home when they were new to the school and how that had a positive impact. His family now has the teachers’ pictures framed and up on the wall of their dining room with other family pictures. “We felt welcomed and supported when they came to visit, and we knew that our kids would be in great hands.”

When asked how they feel involved, a mom in the focus group talked about how the only thing she knows to be involved in is conferences, but she desires more than that. “I don’t just want to leave things at conferences and have that be it, I want to build relationships with the teachers.” she explained. She shared about how being a part of a school is being a part of a community and how wonderful it would be to form relationships with other teachers, students, and families.

Several parents responded to the involvement question with answers like, “No one has reached out to me to tell me they want to see me or how I can help.” and “I have never had an invitation to fellowship with the teacher.” This finding is consistent with the

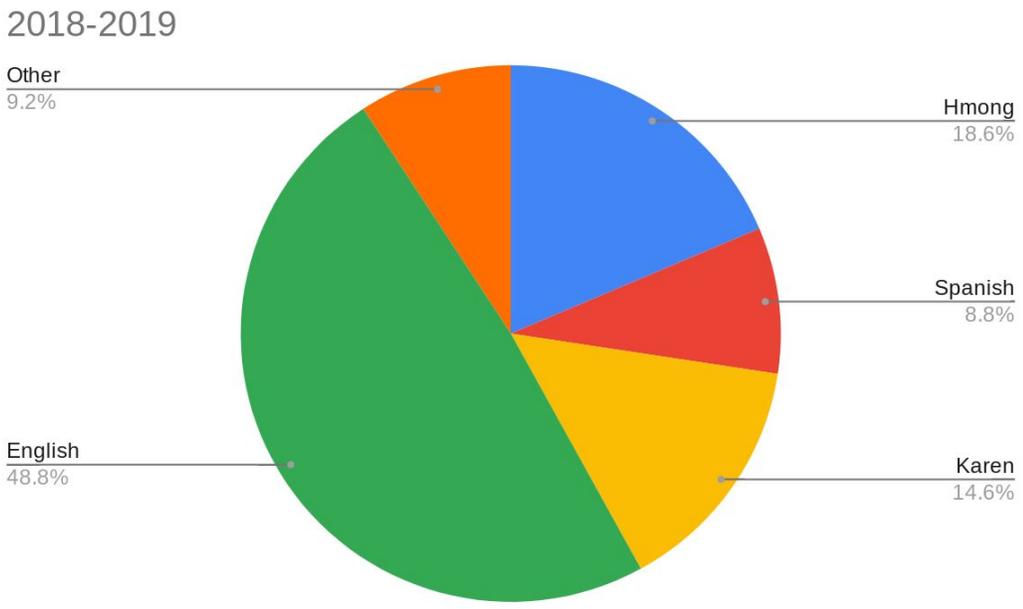
research that identifies reaching out and inviting families to events as one positive inclusive strategy of engagement (Rah et al., 2009).

In one interview, a mother shared how she even feels isolated and lonely when she comes to the school because she doesn't know the teachers. "They just did their own thing and seemed too busy. We were new to the school and no one talked to us. We felt very uncomfortable." This is evidence that is supported by the research of Niehaus and Adelson (2014). They report that though the EL population is one of the fastest growing in the nation, teachers are struggling to engage their EL families or create partnerships that are effective.

Additional evidence that supports relationships as meaningful engagement are the statistics of Karen family participation in events for the 2018-2019 school year. Of the data gathered from five separate events, the two biggest turnouts for the Karen families were Meet the Teacher night and conferences. Both of these events involve time spent engaging with the teacher. The 14% and 16% attendance rate for these events accurately reflects the school-wide data, where Karen students make up 15% of the student population. The figure below displays the schoolwide demographic breakdown for the top language spoken.

Figure 1

School Demographic Breakdown, Home Language 2018-2019



The data collected from the school event sign-in forms indicate a lack of engagement for three out of the five events. Furthermore, the number of Karen families that attended the Academic Expo, Special Friend’s Day, and the Writing Celebrations is not representative of the Karen population at the school. The table below displays the analysis of this data. Each event is broken down by the attendance of families from the

three largest language groups, and then compares that data to the total attendance. This gives a better idea as to who is showing up for these events, and if these numbers are depictive of the schoolwide demographics.

Table 1

School Event Totals 2018-2019

<u>Event</u>	<u>Hmong</u>	<u>Karen</u>	<u>Spanish</u>	<u>Total Attendance</u>
Meet the Teacher Night	50 (14%)	57 (16%)	57 (16%)	363
Conferences	131 (18%)	107 (15%)	108 (15%)	720
Academic Expo	27 (30%)	8 (8%)	13 (14%)	90
Special Friends Day	6 (7%)	3 (4%)	19 (23%)	82
Writing Celebrations	4 (10%)	0	6 (15%)	40

Multiple Karen families expressed a desire to build relationships with other Karen families in the school community. This was an additional aspect they reported would be meaningful. In one interview, a father shared one of his favorite parts of going to

conferences is to be able to visit with the other Karen families that are there. He spoke of one benefit from connecting with parents of other Karen students in our school is that they can support each other with navigating the American school system, which they did not grow up in. He offered up the idea to have a monthly meeting for the Karen families at the school, and many other participants in this study agreed that this would be meaningful to them. This thought was echoed by another parent, who shared that she feels reluctant to go to parent meetings because she knows she won't understand what is happening. She expressed her desire to meet with other Karen families in the school community to be able to assist and encourage each other.

Connecting with teachers and building relationships with other families in the school was a strong theme throughout all the interviews and focus group. Feelings of loneliness, isolation, and inadequacy were identified as a result of the lack of relationship and invitation to participate in school functions. These findings support the idea that strengthening relationships within the school community is perceived as a form of meaningful engagement.

Karen Families Perceive Meaningful Engagement as being Equipped with Resources That Empower them to Support their Children

“I wish to see my daughter excel,” one mother shared, “But I do not have the funds or the knowledge.” The final theme that emerged from this research was that the Karen families have a strong desire to support their children, but do not always have the resources to do that. Several families brought up communication regarding academic

content being taught in the classroom, and how they would like to know ahead of time to be more prepared to help at home. One mom suggested, “It would be nice if some kind of class was offered to families relating to what students will be learning in class, like academic terms we should know.” She went on to say she feels inadequate to help. Even digital tools used to support learning like IXL or Seesaw can be confusing to families. “Not all parents have the knowledge or resources to access those resources,” commented one mother.

Another aspect of communication that was mentioned repeatedly was the fact that the families often times do not understand forms or papers being sent home. One participant shared, “I only sign what my son tells me to sign, but I do not know what it is.” And although many documents are translated into Karen, the adults at home are not always literate in Karen. “I only went to school for second grade, so I do not know what the papers say, even in Karen,” a mom reported. This language barrier puts a lot of responsibility and pressure on the children to communicate. In fact, one father explained they only go to events that their kids tell them about, because the communication barrier makes it hard to be informed of all events being offered. They feel that they are missing out on important resources that will help them to support their children’s education. Research has demonstrated that the language barrier can cause a lack of communication between home and school, and can lead to frustration and a lack of participation for families (Neihaus and Adelson, 2014). Panferov (2010) points out that when children are forced to interpret between school and home, much damage can be done due to role reversals and blurred lines of authority. One suggestion made by the participants was to

have a meeting, either at the beginning of the year or even once a month, where all documents and important events are shared with the families to keep them informed.

An additional resource proposed was to have some kind of class offered on how to discipline and build relationships with their children in the American culture. “I only knew to discipline with spanking, but that is not ok to do here, ” shared one mom. She was not sure how to approach discipline in a different way, nor did she feel like she could understand her daughter in the American culture. This same thought was echoed by another mom. “I have a hard time getting my son’s attention and disciplining him, so maybe if there was a class on American parenting styles, or how to build relationships with my children who are living in two cultures,” she remarked. Research has demonstrated that when these types of support services are offered to EL families, they are more likely to be involved and engaged in their child’s education (Niehaus & Adelson, 2014).

Lastly, the idea of parent empowerment was stressed several times in regards to meaningful engagement. These families want to empower and encourage each other. One participant of the focus group, who has been a part of our school for many years, shared about what would have been helpful to her when her children first started at our school. “I would have liked to hear that we are important and play an important role in supporting our children, even if we don’t feel adequate.” She offered to come and do this for other parents. “This is a community thing. If there is a Karen parent meeting night with teachers, I would be willing to come and share information about the school, their vision and goals. If they don’t know the vision, then they won’t know how to support the

school. I also want to share about what they will be learning, and show them.” She went on to say if this was to happen, if we can just assure them that we support them in wherever they are, they will be encouraged. She stressed they want to support the school, and not just send the kids.

Equipping the Karen families with resources that empower them to support their children at home and at school was a distinct theme identified in regards to meaningful engagement. These families desire to empower each other and their children, but at times lack the resources to do so. As Chavez-Reyes (2010) points out, when schools advocate to provide these needed resources and services, families feel more accepted and more inclined to be engaged.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the data collected as part of this study was analyzed for emerging themes to answer the research question: *What does meaningful engagement with schools look like to Karen families?* Three themes were identified as meaningful engagement for the Karen families:

- Karen families perceive meaningful engagement to be culturally relevant.
- Karen families perceive meaningful engagement to be relational.
- Karen families perceive meaningful engagement as being equipped with resources that empower them to support their children

The implications of the themes outlined in this chapter, along with its limitations, will be examined in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Introduction

According to the National Center for Education statistics (2019), English Learners (ELs) make up 14% of total public school enrollment in cities, and is one of the fastest growing segments within the school-aged population. However, school staff are struggling to find meaningful ways to connect with and engage with these families (Niehaus and Adelson, 2014). This is concerning due to the fact that parent-family-school relations are critical to student success (Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Tyson, 2009, Jeynes, 2005). Over the last several years, I began to notice a disparity in the demographics of the families attending school events compared to the demographic makeup of our school, specifically with regards to the Karen families. Knowing the research connecting academic success and family engagement, I began to ponder what the disconnect was between the perspectives of the Karen families and the

school staff relating to meaningful family engagement. This led me to my research question: *What does meaningful engagement with schools look like to Karen families?* Chapter four analyzed the data collected to identify themes in order to answer the research question. Chapter five concludes the research design that attempts to interpret this research questions. This chapter will address the significant findings, implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Significant Findings

Through the data collection process, three themes emerged in response to the research question:

1. Karen families perceive meaningful engagement to be culturally relevant.
2. Karen families perceive meaningful engagement to be relational.
3. Karen families perceive meaningful engagement as being equipped with resources that empower them to support their children

The clearest theme to emerge was that of cultural relevance. Families did not perceive their culture to be represented in academics or school events, which produced a sense that their cultural identity was not valued by the staff at the school. Naqvi et al., (2015) presents how affirming families' identities is another way to support their engagement, but that when there is a lack of cultural identity affirmation, families will feel inferior to staff and refuse to participate. This research was confirmed by my findings when families shared they felt not known, inadequate, and uncomfortable at the school. Naqvi et al., (2015) recommends the inclusive engagement strategy of tapping

into the families' funds of knowledge to give EL families an opportunity to share about their home culture and experiences. The participants in this research study gave several suggestions for how they would like to share about their culture; they offered up cooking for staff, presenting on their culture during conferences, the talent show, and at staff meetings.

Additionally, these findings on cultural relevance correlates with literature reviewed in chapter two of this thesis, which is the idea that the traditional view of involvement can be a barrier to EL families when it comes to family engagement (Chavez-Reyes, 2010). These traditional views tend to suppress families from non-traditional backgrounds by supporting acculturation and assimilation and not ethnic heritage maintenance. This was reflected in the focus group and interviews with Karen families. They expressed a desire for their children to not only learn English, but to also have their Karen heritage and language valued.

The second theme, Karen families perceive meaningful engagement to be relational, is also supported by literature outlined in chapter two. Helo-Trevino's (2016) study on family engagement argues the importance of inviting families to the school and engaging in home visits. These two concepts are considered inclusive engagement strategies that can have significant benefits when it comes to students' academic achievement. Several families in the data collection of this research expressed the hope of an invitation to be involved in events other than just conferences, to fellowship with the teacher, and for the teachers to visit their homes and religious services. Several studies support the idea of home visits; that they build relationships between schools and

families, and facilitate the learning of culture and backgrounds of students and families (Chen, Kyle, & McIntyre, 2008; Panferov 2010; Naqvi et al., 2015). Chen et al. (2008) reports that home visits are so valuable that not only can deficit views be reduced, but teachers will be able to use what they learned to incorporate connections to their students' lives in their lessons.

The last major theme that emerged from this study was that Karen families perceive being equipped with resources that empower them as meaningful engagement. Several points in the literature review of chapter two affirm this finding. Niehaus & Adelson (2014) report that EL families are more likely to be involved and engaged in their child's education if support services are provided.

Families that participated in this study shared their suggestions for specific resources that would attempt to break these barriers: classes for families on how to navigate the American school system, once-a-month meetings to build confidence and preparation of homework support, and English classes. Specific barriers to engagement of EL families such as a lack of confidence in reading and math, insufficient knowledge of the American school system, and language are all echoed in the literature review (Naqvi et al., 2015) and participants' responses. One mother even shared about her desire for classes on parenting techniques that connect with American parenting styles. This correlates with the research of McBrien (2011), where it is mentioned that many EL families are familiar with corporal punishment in managing their children's behaviors, and do not know how to discipline their children in a way that is acceptable in the American culture. The mother shared her hope in learning how to connect with and build

a relationship with her daughter who is navigating two cultures, and that it would be helpful for the school to offer support for this.

One mother mentioned the desire for a resource that would empower other Karen families. Her idea was to hold a meeting at the beginning of the school year to share the school's vision, encourage those who might not feel adequate, and inform them on how to support the school and their children. Rah et al., (2009) reinforces this idea by stating that this type of resource is critical for EL families so that they can be empowered to advocate for their children.

The last resource mentioned by families in this study was that of communication. Families felt that there was a considerable lack of communication regarding events, academics, and class documents. Neihaus and Adelson (2014) state that this is one of the most significant challenges EL families face in the school setting. The language barrier can lead to feelings of frustration which can cause families to participate less, and it can even bring about tension in the homes of the families. It is often the case that students are responsible for the translation of documents and communication between teachers and families. However, Panferov (2010) and Rah et al. (2009) point out that that having the child act as the translator often leads to role reversals within the home. This unfortunately can lead to additional challenges where the roles between family and child are blurred. Families may feel a sense of disempowerment, or as though they have lost their authority as head of the family. This, in turn, can create tension and lead to inter-generational conflict (Rah et al., 2009; Tran & Hodgson, 2015). Several participants in this study mentioned the dependence on their children to inform them of

events and documents to sign, and that they would appreciate better communication from the school in the form of phone calls with translators or parent meetings about important events and documents.

Direct Implications

Several clear discoveries were made in this research that have implications for the Karen families and staff at our school and district. While the findings revealed that families are content with the overall experience at the school, there was strong evidence that the traditional involvement framework being used by the school was not meaningful to these families. This section will discuss possible implications for our school and district as a result of this research.

Key stakeholders must be made aware of the research findings in order to make a shift to meaningful engagement. This study confirmed the idea that the perception of what meaningful family engagement is can differ between stakeholders. These differing perceptions can potentially lead to miscommunications and have negative effects on the students and their education (McBrien, 2011; Chavez-Reyes, 2010; Rah, Choi, & Nguyen, 2009; Niehaus & Adelson, 2014; Naqvi et al., 2015). In order to avoid these ramifications, stakeholders within the school community need to be informed.

Once the data collection was complete, I had the opportunity to share the results with several stakeholders in the district. The first opportunity was with the Title I implementation team, which meets as a part of the requirement for being a designated

Title I school. One of the conditions that come with being a Title I school is to have an action plan for engaging families in activities, so the administration was interested in how the data from my research connects with the current plan. An immediate result of that meeting was changing the way school events important news are communicated, making sure that the robocall that goes out to alert families is done in multiple languages. Additionally, the team will be looking at the planned events for the next year, and potentially making changes to move away from an involvement framework and towards an engagement mindset. One example of this is to plan a cultural celebration night which will include a potluck, dancing, and sharing about cultures within our school.

The second opportunity to share my data with stakeholders was during a meeting of cultural liaisons, the administrator, assistant superintendent of the district, and the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) president and vice president. The goal of this meeting was to check in with the liaisons regarding family engagement. The majority of the meeting was spent in discussion of my research data, and how we as a school can start to move away from the involvement framework. Many suggestions were made for how to begin the process of meaningfully engaging families. One idea was to modify the way conferences are done by taking the three nights of traditional conferences and moving to one night of traditional conferences, one night for a potluck style gathering for families to share traditional foods from their culture, and the last night for home visits. This gives families a chance to choose what is meaningful to them.

Another idea given at the meeting was to offer classes for Karen students and adults after school as a part of a program that is currently being run at our site each day.

This program is a part of a multi-year grant that not only has funds available for students, but adults as well. The grant points out that families of the students have a need for an increased sense of belonging and connectedness in their school community, and one way to accomplish this is with adult classes, or family academies. Providing English classes, parenting classes, or even Karen literacy classes for families aligns with what meaningful engagement is from the Karen families' perspectives being that it is empowering and originated from their thoughts and ideas. Research from Naqvi et al. (2015) supports this concept of engagement, that it is a two-way collaboration between families and schools, and the families are included as decision makers of the school.

The third opportunity made available to me to share my research was an invitation to speak at the PTA meeting. The PTA president and vice president contacted me after the cultural liaison meeting and asked if I would be the guest speaker at the next meeting, to continue the conversation around engagement vs. involvement. This meeting was attended by about twenty family members from the school community (including one Karen mother, who had been specifically invited by the vice president), the principal, a classroom teacher, and a school board member. After I shared what I had learned from my research and data collection, a rich discussion followed. The Karen mother that was there even shared her thoughts about not feeling adequate to support her children academically due to a lack of education, and offered her support of the adult classes after school. The PTA voiced their desire to move towards engagement, specifically in a way that was meaningful to all families.

The next step in sharing this research with stakeholders will be to inform the current staff working at our school regarding the themes that emerged from the data collection. This will be taking place in the near future at a staff development meeting, and it is an important step in shifting away from involvement and towards engagement. It is also something the families mentioned was important to them. One participant stated her wish for teachers to make an effort to build relationships and initiate meaningful engagement.

Staff must be intentional with home visits in order to build relationships and connect with families. Families repeatedly stressed their hope of building relationships with the teachers at the schools by having them to their homes. Being that the Karen culture is so communal, and they consider teachers to have a distinguished status, they feel honored to host their children's teachers at their home. One father mentioned the difficulty of reaching out to the teacher to do this, and the wish that the teachers would be more available to do home visits and even church visits, so they could experience their culture and build stronger relationships with the families. Not only would home visits succeed at building connections with the families, but the families also have an assurance that their children are in excellent hands when they are in school.

Helo-Trevino's (2016) study on family engagement supports the idea of home visits, stating they facilitate the development of respect for other cultures and are a way for teachers to learn the strengths of their EL families. Additionally, home visits help to reduce any deficit views the teachers may have (Chen et al., 2008). Teachers are also able

to use what they learned to make connections to the students' lives and incorporate that into their lessons. When teachers reach out to families to learn from them, families then know that they are integral and not peripheral.

Due to the fact that home visits do take extra time and effort on the teacher's part, the administration must find ways to support the teachers with this effort. An idea the administration at Carsten is considering to accomplish this is by taking one of the three nights that are contractually required for teachers to be available for conferences, and designating it for home visits. Those families who would prefer this option over coming to the school for traditional conferences could choose a home visit instead.

Broad Implications

The themes that emerged from this research not only have direct implications for my school and district, but can be significant for districts beyond ours. Given that the EL population is one of the fastest growing segments in the nation for school-aged children (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), these findings can facilitate meaningful engagement for any district with an English Learner population. This section will discuss possible implications for schools and districts beyond ours, as a result of this research.

Engagement has a strong emphasis on the families' voices and ideas. As Chavez-Reyes (2010) points out, family engagement begins to emerge when schools collaborate and listen to families' suggestions and opinions. This is what sets engagement apart from involvement. The ideas and energy come from the families. Yet schools continue to struggle with the idea of approaching and inviting families to

collaborate in decision making within the school community. This potentially comes from a deficit mindset, which is when school staff believe that families do not have the necessary skills or knowledge needed to help their children succeed (Garcia and Guerra, 2004).

However, as this research has discovered, the families are eager to be invited and consulted regarding engagement that is meaningful to them. The participants were full of ideas on what they would like to see offered, what would support them and their children, and hopes and visions for the future in relation to the school. Their ideas were quite contrasting to the events and activities that are currently offered. This caused me to question if anyone had ever asked them how they wanted to be engaged, or what would be most meaningful to them. Being that engagement is family driven (Ferlazzo, 2009), the first step is to approach the families, specifically families that are representative of the school demographics, to inquire about their thoughts regarding being involved in school. This is an essential stride that must be taken to begin the development of reciprocal and trusting relationships that will lead to meaningful engagement.

The way families are invited to engage affects their willingness to participate.

The mode of communication for school events and activities was consistently identified as a barrier for engagement to the participants of this study. It was mentioned over and over again that they feel uninformed regarding most of the operations happening at school. This led to feelings of disconnection and isolation. When schools do not reach out to families in ways they can understand, families feel a sense of disempowerment (Rah et al., 2009).

One mother shared the fact that the only thing she knows to attend is conferences, because the cultural liaison calls to set that up for them. She continued to share about how she doesn't know what any of the documents being sent home say, because they are either in English or Karen. She only had one year of schooling when she was a child, so she cannot read or write in Karen. Even the robocalls to all families in the school were in English, shared another participant. He mentioned the best way to communicate would be a phone call with an interpreter so they do not have to be dependent on their children to inform them of all that happens at school. Research states that when children become the main interpreter between school and home, the lines of authority become blurred and creates role reversals at home (Panferov, 2010; Rah et al., 2009). It is critical to use forms of communication that families can understand in order to avoid this barrier to engagement. Reaching out to families using tools such as language line (a translation service used in our district and paid for by the district), or cultural liaison to personally invite them to engage will bridge the gap in communication and reinforce the families' willingness to engage.

It is essential that schools utilize the families' funds of knowledge. Tapping into families' funds of knowledge is an inclusive engagement strategy that invites and encourages families to share their home cultures and experiences (Naqvi et al., 2015). The participants in this study strongly expressed their desire to share their culture with the staff and families in the school community in a variety of ways in order to feel known and affirmed in their cultural identity. Providing opportunities for these families to do

this demonstrates a positive attitude towards their home language and culture, and it affirms the fact that they have strengths and resources to bring to the school community (Chen et al., 2008; Niehaus et al., 2014). This is supported by the research of Chavez-Reyes (2010), where it is stated that when schools tap into the funds of knowledge of their EL families, they feel empowered and encouraged to engage in their children's education.

Limitations

Like all studies, this investigation also has limitations. The first limitation is the small sample size of participants in this study due to the fact that there were a total of only seven Karen individuals questioned. This is a relatively small number and is not proportionate to the population of Karen within our school community, and cities outside of our community. It would be interesting and valuable to hear from a larger number of families within the school and district to compare responses and themes.

The next limitation is the matter of the participants being unique to our individual school community. These findings are only representative of the Karen families in our school, and cannot be assumed for all Karen families in schools and districts beyond ours. This limitation was confirmed with the families' personal stories of meaningful engagement in schools other than ours. Individual schools may be further along in the journey towards meaningful engagement, therefore the themes identified would be different.

Another limitation is my positionality as a white woman and teacher at the school.

Not only do I bring my own biases to this research, but my presence at the interviews and focus group may have potentially caused biased responses. Additionally, the fact that I am a teacher within the school community may have presented a power dynamic that pressured the families to withhold negative feedback and honest answers.

Recommendations for Future Research

One consideration for future research would be to investigate how the extent of time spent in the American school system may impact perceptions of what meaningful engagement looks like to families from other home languages and cultures. It would be compelling to explore the perceptions of what meaningful engagement is to the current Karen students several years from now, when they have children enrolled in school. The themes could potentially be drastically different.

Another consideration for future research would be to examine what meaningful engagement looks like to Karen families with children in secondary education. Many factors may affect these perceptions due to the considerable size difference of the school community, or the contrasting events for elementary and secondary schools.

Additionally, students are increasingly more independent in their academics, which may change the opinions and ideas of what families would like to be offered as support.

The final consideration for additional research would be to look into what meaningful engagement may be to other home languages and cultures. It is important to recognize that what is significant to one culture may not be to another culture. Given that 9% of the school demographics at Carsten are made up of languages other than Spanish,

Hmong, and Karen, it would be valuable to inquire into the idea of meaningful engagement from their perspectives as well. Beyond our school, due to the fact that the United States is rapidly growing in other languages and cultures, so it would be prudent to study their perceptions on engagement as well.

Conclusion

Little did I know that over ten years ago, the seed of this research topic was beginning to sprout. My experiences with the Karen students in my class left an impact on me that I still feel strongly today. I longed to see these students succeed, and their families feel affirmed in their Karen identities, and I knew that one way to accomplish this was through family engagement. I wished there were a way to make this happen.

I began the process of this thesis hoping to find an answer as to where the disconnect was in engaging these families, and I am coming away with so much more than I expected. I have a stronger understanding as to what sets engagement apart from traditional involvement, and why engagement is so much more effective and affirming for families. Through the literature review, I developed a strong comprehension to the barriers and supports for family engagement, and gathered a deep background knowledge for the past experiences of the Karen refugees. This has helped me to understand and connect more with so many more of the families that I work with.

The highlight of the research though, was the relationships and connections made through the data collection process. Going into the families' homes was such an eye-opening and humbling experience. Hearing their thoughts and ideas on their

perceptions of meaningful engagement shared invaluable knowledge that helped me to identify several themes to answer the research question. Their responses they shared with me have already begun to have a lasting impact and are already changing the way certain things are done in our school and district.

Of course there were limitations with this study, including the small sample size, the participants being unique to our individual school, and my positionality as a white woman and teacher within the school. These should be taken into consideration for future studies in this area of research. Additional recommendations for further research include examining the length of time spent in the American culture and school system, investigating the perceptions of families who have children in middle and high school, and exploring the idea of meaningful engagement for families of other languages and cultures.

Reflecting on this last year and the work I have done for this thesis, I feel hopeful for the Karen families in our school and district. I have witnessed the leaders and stakeholders' willingness to change, and their actions to follow through with this change. I have seen the bravery of the Karen families, and the fact that they will do anything to see their children succeed. I have come to this conclusion: that as long as the goal for all involved in education is to truly support student success, and all are willing to work together for this cause, growth and change will happen. Furthermore, meaningful family engagement *is* possible when all stakeholders are willing to listen to families, see other perspectives, and keep students' success as the main objective.

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Appendix A - Interview Questions

Tell me about your experience with Carsten and your child's learning.

- How many children have attended?
- How long have you been connected to the school?
- Has it been a good experience or have you had difficulty?

-How do you experience parent/teacher conferences?

-How do you support your child's education?

- Tell me about your support at school.
- Tell me about your support at home.

-In what ways do you feel involved in your child's school?

-Do you feel supported by your child's teacher?

- How would you feel more supported?

-In what ways have you been welcomed?

-Do you feel comfortable at your child's school?

-How would you like to be involved? (examples: coming in to share about their culture, being a part of a parent focus group to give their ideas of school events, a culture celebration night)

-What do you see your role in your child's education (school and at home?)

-What would you see offered more in the school?

-How often do you go to school events?

- Why do you choose to go, or why do you not?

-Do you feel your culture is promoted at school events?

- If yes, how?

Appendix B - Focus Group Questions

Tell me about your experience with Carsten and your child's learning.

- How many children have attended?
- How long have you been connected to the school?
- Has it been a good experience or have you had difficulty?

-How do you experience parent/teacher conferences?

-How do you support your child's education?

- Tell me about your support at school.
- Tell me about your support at home.

-In what ways do you feel involved in your child's school?

-Do you feel supported by your child's teacher?

- How would you feel more supported?

-In what ways have you been welcomed?

-Do you feel comfortable at your child's school?

-How would you like to be involved? (examples: coming in to share about their culture, being a part of a parent focus group to give their ideas of school events, a culture celebration night)

- What do you see your role in your child's education (school and at home?)
- What would you see offered more in the school?
- How often do you go to school events?
 - Why do you choose to go, or why do you not?
- Do you feel your culture is promoted at school events?
 - If yes, how?
- Do you feel you can voice your concerns during parent/teacher conferences?
- Looking back, is there something that you wish you would have known or that someone would have told you?